

Re-thinking Reading for Next Generation Educational Assessments

by Michael Hock, Director Educational Assessment

“Next Generation” is a term that has been used frequently to describe the new educational assessments being developed by the federally funded PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment consortia. To a great extent the reference comes from the advanced computer technologies that will be used to administer and score the tests. The description fits, however, for other reasons that have not been widely publicized but may end up having a significant impact on what and how we teach. The decision by both PARCC and Smarter Balanced to permit some student to use computer text to speech (TTS) tools on their reading tests is a prime example of “next generation” thinking, and should prompt considerable debate on what we really mean by “reading,” and if it means different things to different students at different grade levels.

Both consortia relied on a wide variety of expert input, from both curriculum experts and disabilities advocates, before making the decision to permit read-aloud for reading passages, an accommodation that has been widely rejected on our current generation of tests. The Smarter Balanced guidelines for use of TTS were crafted to ensure that only qualified students receive the support they need to accurately demonstrate their skills while maintaining the overall integrity of the assessment: to qualify, an IEP or 504 team must determine that the student demonstrates a long-term reading disability and is at least a fifth grader.

Smarter Balanced applied three criteria to determine if providing TTS for reading passages fit the overall design priorities for the assessment: accessibility options must (1) be consistent with the Common Core State Standards, (2) fit the overall notion of Career and College Readiness, and (3) promote sound educational decisions while avoiding negative unintended consequences. The decision to restrict TTS to the upper grades is consistent with the Common Core standards, which discontinue references to decoding after grade 4, and the Consortium also decided it was particularly important to avoid having its approved supports and accommodations give the mistaken impression that it is alright to label young students as “non-readers” and stop trying to teach them. For older students, the opposite is the case. The compelling message that came from expert testimony was that the personal computer, with its array of embedded accessibility tools, means that students with reading disabilities can still be Career and College Ready. The message students, parents and teacher should take away from the Consortia’s decision on TTS is that it’s never okay to give up on teaching students to read, but in middle and high school it may be equally important to ensure that students know how to use the array of Next Generation tools that just might be the ticket to a successful life after high school.

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